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“The Power of Song”: A Political-Cultural Analysis of Mischief Brew

I. Object of Study

Within various points of history politics and culture have intersected at various points to change how society operates, this is particularly relevant when listening to any of the studio albums of Mischief Brew a Philadelphia-based punk band active between the years of 2000 to 2016, one can see when browsing their discography and attention to to the politics of culture. This is best displayed by Erik Peterson (lead singer) in the first track of the debut album for the band in 2005 “Smash the Windows!” simply titled “The Reinvention Of The Printing Press” which is rife with mentions of worker uprisings during the early modern period of history with lyrics such as: “[G]argantua’s hungry / His fork and knife drumming / But, what if we served him no more? / If just for a day / We took over this place / To find out where our harvests are stored [...]”. Lyrics such as these display an apparent portrait of life under feudalism and the political conflict of interests between the rationing of food between peasants and of royalty and nobility. The ability to paint historical-cultural narratives through music and politics draws me towards the study of

this band as not many other bands offer a similar amount of story-driven lyricism fused with politics and historical records of yonder and connecting them to today's social and material realities. Readers through this paper will gain a much more thorough image of the political and cultural contexts in which Mischief Brew produced and wrote their albums alongside references to various forgotten and ill-remembered points in history and how music helps in the construction of counter-cultural narratives in the modern day in a time where social and political stratification has accelerated. Cultural practices seem to be increasingly monocultural under the neoliberal economic lens.

II. Issues

The issues that have been chosen for this paper are that of politics (legal issues and policy) alongside culture (representation) these are important issues as out of all the 84 unique songs contained within Mischief Brew's studio albums a majority of songs present oftentimes carry the motifs via critique of establishment politics from an anarchist/anti-authoritarian perspective by mentioning or alluding to social movements of the past or alluding to common cultural motifs within the United States. A good example of this in practice can be seen in the second track of the debut as mentioned earlier album "Smash the Windows" with the song Citizens Drive which exemplifies this mix of politically charged cultural analysis with the following verse: "Life in these houses, locked inside / There's blood on the floor and candlelight / Night / Close your eyes and wish it by / Call up the police to sing their lullabies / Play a hero, John Wayne / Put guns in our living rooms / Gates 'round our names / Give us a face to join up and hate / Keep Tiny Town pure and safe". What this particular verse highlights is the attitude within suburban neighborhoods and the outlying areas to perceive cities and more urban areas as hotbeds for

violent crime alongside the disconnect between media framing of crime and its on-the-ground reality. However, the cultural analysis is also present with the framing of John Wayne a reactionary conservative Hollywood star of the post-WW2 United States as a prominent cultural figure that many Americans of the mid-20th century looked up to and revered alongside the intersection of gun culture to tie in with the idea of keeping suburban neighborhoods "small, pure, and safe" from outsiders who alleged exist to create havoc and danger to communities. This is presented with recent research that analyzes how mainstream framing of crime adds to the perception of disorder and crime[1] and the impacts shown by the National Retail Federation and the retraction of their key claim that half of the retail theft can be attributed to organized crime[2].

III. Research Question

What my research seeks to accomplish is to analyze how alternative cultures manage to survive and adapt despite increased monopolization and monocultural development as opposed to anti-capitalist and multicultural development in the spaces that people inhabit. Alongside this, the research will hopefully paint a clearer and brighter picture of the socio-historical conditions littered throughout and referenced in the lyrics such as the first track to Mischief Brew's 2006 album "Songs From Under The Sink" titled "Thanks, Bastards!" which references the death Amadou Diallo in 1999 framing it with this following verse: "[F]or everytime your gun goes off / A new rebel is born / So when there's 41 bullets / It's 41,000 thorns in your side / We'll take a

[1] Cannon, C.E.B.; Gotham, K.F.; Lauve-Moon, K.; Powers, B. Assessing Resident Perceptions of Physical Disorder on Perceptions of Crime. *Soc. Sci.* **2023**, *12*, 77. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020077

[2] https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/us-retail-lobbyists-retract-key-claim-organized-retail-crime-2023-12-06/

ride down to Precinct 29 / And we'll sing and dance and break the code of silence". Framing the killing as the birthing of rebels against police brutality and a critique of contagious fire exemplify the research question I seek to answer why and how music act as a counter-cultural force and how it remains a strengthened social force in the present.

IV. Literature Review

Much of the literature used for this paper was used specifically to further contextualize the socio-historical underpinnings of Mischief Brew as an anarchist punk band from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For instance, in bell hooks's 2009 essay titled "Kentucky is My Fate" in which Hooks chronicles her experience being raised in the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky, what particularly assists with this essay is her experience in rural environments and the descriptions writing the following: "I would talk about an Appalachia that was black and white, about the shadow of cold dust on the bodies of black men coming home from working in the mines. I would talk about fields of tobacco, about the horses that make the Kentucky bluegrass a field of enchantment." (hooks, 2009). This assists in contextualizing songs like "O, Pennsyltucky!" which discusses the degradation of poverty-stricken rural areas in Pennsylvania and looks at it through the lens of a former inhabitant returning with the lyrics reading: "O Pennsyltucky! / Your three mile islands / The coal fires buckle the miners highway [...]". Particularly mentioning the region outside of the city of Pittsburgh area "Pennsyltucky" a particular region in Pennsylvania most known for its poverty, the Three Mile Island disaster of 1979 in which a partial nuclear meltdown of the Unit 2 reactor led to the release of radioactive gasses and iodine into the environment.

However, this weaves an additional thread when discussing Mischief Brew's political positions as a common lyrical theme is that of gentrification and the battle between ownership of spaces as Patrick Sharkey in his 2009 book titled "Stuck In Place" paints the foundations of gentrification in the following manner "To put it differently, the American ghetto appears to be inherited. In the same way that genetic background and financial wealth are passed down from parents to children, the neighborhood environments in which black and white Americans live have been passed down across generations, a process that has continued even in the post civil rights era." (Sharkey, 2009). Peterson paints a similar portrait of poverty and the inheritance of the ghetto within various songs throughout Mischief Brew's discography in fact within the band's unique 84 songs spanning 8 albums it's a common theme throughout the songs oftentimes chronicling its devastating effects on families, communities, and the general atmosphere of places foundationally changing as a result. The most thorough song to critique this sentiment comes from the song "Lancaster Avenue Blues" with the title referencing the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike and frames the conflict of gentrification and dispossession with the following verse: "40 ounces, Hoagie City, east on 30, from the woods / I was raised up in West Philly by a pack of crazy wolves / You got your wreckin' balls and eminent domain / You got your buildings where we work, and used to play / But we knew the night was over when Univer-City banners came". The threat of violence from gentrification as Sharkey points is inherited and forced due to inequities in the policy and actions but also comes at the cost of destroying long-established communities in favor of serving developers and business interests. The final thread of literature reveals itself through social facts a concept that Emile Durkheim describes as "A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting-over the individual an external constraint" (Durkheim, 59). This is best displayed by the common theme of direct action and

other means of horizontal organizing that seek to disrupt and abolish various kinds of social stratification, again much like poverty critique of stratification in all forms is omnipresent within Mischief Brew's music but, can best be displayed with the song "Dallas In Romania" a song which aims the Americanization of the globe culturally and economically alongside the reification of workers, being seen as an immaterial object to be traded and sold especially when listening to the following verse "Well, I'm sorry to say / The common man ain't no working-class saint / He just wants some rest at the end of the day / Whether America / Or somewhere far off in the East / He's falling asleep / Watching our programs on TV". This can be taken further by the notion of Americanization viewed as a natural force rather than one that's the product of inequitable global relationships between the United States and the rest of the world oftentimes withholding or hoarding key resources, aid, information, and imposing its will on other nations through uncompromising military strength, further reinforced by the chorus which reads the following "We can't go back / This crazy old train never blew off track / This great royal ship never steered off course / Like it or not, we're moving in next door / By grace or force". The lyrics of various Mischief Brew songs such as the ones previously mentioned and sprinkled throughout the article should be seen more as the combined synthesis of the literature chosen rather than randomly selected songs as out of 84 unique songs 12 of them are most significant and display this synthesis as clearly as possible.

V. Outcome

The process of research went as follows: I would listen to each song in order of appearance and release of album date and highlight any lyrics that were of interest as the criteria were that the lyrics are significant in mentioning historical events, social commentary, or of literary interest.

One example is Peterson's cover of the 1923 traditional folk song "Midnight Special" a song which critiques the carceral system from the perspective of a prisoner, however it's important to note that Peterson most likely covered the 1927 version of the song as the first verse sung by Sam Collins reads as follows: "[W]hen you get up in the morning when the ding dong ring - lordy / You make it to the table, see the same old thing. / Ain't nothing on the table, but the pots and the pans - lordy / Say anything about it, have trouble with the man". However uponcloser examination one can decipher that this is in fact a re-wording of the 1933 cover by Huddie Williams Ledbetter as it contains the chorus at the start of the song and has the title "The Midnight Special of 2002" in which after the chorus is sung the first verse goes as follows: "Well, you wake up in the morning / And it's the same old thing / Dehumanization by the inhumane / The warden's dog is treated better / And I can't take it no more / Think it's time to turn some pages / No more to study war". This can also highlight the transition of prisons from treatment during the Iraq war as a means of political oppression for refusing to serve in the military or for defecting from the United States, which falls in line with the history of the writing during the writing for the album "Songs From Under The Sink" as the songs were written between 1997 - 2002 and then recorded in 2005. Alongside this when asked in an interview for Punk Globe by Tyler Vile as to why Peterson chose the song he responded by saying "The story behind that song is that I was playing an anti-death penalty rally in Pennsylvania on the state capitol steps and 'Midnight Special' is an old prison song. I decided to rework the song in fifteen minutes or less for this rally and those were the lyrics I came up with and I thought that song deserved a spot on the record" (Vile, 2009). This adds an extra layer to the anarchist style of Mischief Brew as a band and Erik Peterson as a singer but, is a common theme throughout the albums. Take for instance the 8th track of the album titled "Love and Rage" which most likely is

a reference to the Continental Anarchist Federation of the same name, we can deduce this due to the song lyrics mentioning historical racial injustice in music with the second verse: “I'm hearing some old singer sing / A song that our taletellers bring / It has been sung through cracked jaws, swollen tongues / In the land of the free / Where they say freedom rings”. But, alongside this is the explicit condemnation of racism at the end of the song with the final verse reading “So now that I see where I am / I see race still determines the blessed from the damned / And the greatest of all historical shams / Is believing you cannot do something you can”. This can also be a reference to the fact that during the tail end of the 20th century, the Love & Rage Anarchist Federation collapsed and dissolved due to internal disagreements among the organization's tenants regarding anti-racism.

However, Peterson also provides cultural commentary on the United States and the development of the monocultural American identity as a common motif, the most explicit and daring example comes from the album “Bacchanal ‘N’ Philadelphia” with the first track simply titled “Every Town Will Celebrate” however this track takes a deeper look at culture through a jab at the mass production and commodification of culture within the United States with the chorus fiercely claiming “And every town will celebrate someday / Waving sweatshop flags and grande lattes / Wearing culture on their backs / Wearing spirit on their hats / One by one they’ll join the parade and celebrate”. What’s painted is an additional layer of an already messy portrait of American identity particularly one that’s foundations rely upon commodity fetishism in that the creation of culture within the United States is based upon webs of social relationships that exist among objects as opposed to relationships and sharing of cultural values and practices among people who are fully fleshed-out and complex. However the criticism of American culture continues

within the song as Peterson lambasts the creation of an American monoculture which leaves no stone, road, or person untouched with the 3rd verse reading “Now corners near and corners far / Are somehow the same coffee bar / Thanks to folks I’ve never met / They slayed the artists, sold their arts / Gave the toddlers shopping carts / Raised the prices, raised the rent / Some days I wish that I could go back again”. As Peterson writes that monocultural development requires that developments build so social interactions such as coffee shops operate and look the same, degrade and restrict artistic freedom as a method of stifling business profits, destruction and dismantling of developmental spaces for children to be replaced with bleak and empty shopping centers, etc. leading to the increase of housing prices due to increased attraction from tourists but, a detriment to local residents and the sense of community connection built over generations of common struggle and shared history. This criticism continues a layer deeper into the second track titled “Olde Tyme Mem’ry” which looks into the gradual loss of individual and familial socio-cultural practices in favor of those which are in line with mainstream culture and its rigidity with the view of unique cultural practices as rare artifacts of the past, as the chorus sorrowfully sings “Come sit down, we’re lamenting / About yesterday’s sad ending / About the water in me’ whiskey / The brass passed off as gold / Another round, we’re descending / Into olde time mem’ry / Of a day when wood was wooden / Silver silver, gold was gold / Sweet home was home”. Again the song takes us a bit deeper calling for the listener to reflect on what cultural practices have been lost and ask themselves why these cultural practices are replaced with mundane repetitions of similar or carbon-copied development styles with the 5th verse reading in part “Son, these tools are artifacts / Endangered species left its tracks / So lock me up behind plastic glass in the city / There’s no going back for me / This antique’s rustic eulogy / Shall be sold as folk artistry, such a pity”. It paints an all to real portrait of how as a result of

unbalanced development entire communities practices and histories are wiped out in what seems like an instant but, seeds are sowed over generations of asset tradings. A different tone of cultural analysis swiftly flies in however, as the 3rd track titled “Boycott Me” a song which paints broad strokes calling back to the various direct action campaigns of the past with the following chorus “Hey! Boycott me and boycott this / And mute your childrens’ mouths / When they sing along to this very song / Spread word all around / Hey, F.O.P., boycott me, for I am standing up! / I’d rather taste a rebel’s glory / Than drink blood from your cup”. The framing of participation of boycotting as an action towards social change is explicitly counter-cultural and against wbat might be called mainstream when one considers the painting of children as rebels for emancipatory causes and the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) who’s origins are found in Pittsburgh, PA and have oftentimes defended various reactionary elements of society be it strikebreakers, far-right agitators, or corporate monopolies the police force origins can be traced to the defenders of the status-quo as a means of social control. This can be best seen with the 4th track of the album “Dirty Pennies” in which Peterson tells a story of a homeless woman who forms a bond with a local child who later becomes a police officer and arrests her, the tension can be best summarized with the 4th verse reading “When she found him, she saw not the young boy / Who dug for the roots of her junk / She came face to face with a stern vacant soldier / Grinnin' and spinnin' a club / He said, ‘Don’t you know that you can’t be here? / You’ll hurt business and scare away the kids / Go wander around in some other town / Get out, or I’m takin’ you in!’”. This conflict of differnt types of social forces being used to uplift in the sense of police in theory to maintain a presence of law and order and keep vulnerable populations safe versus the social force of degradation as enforcing the barring of vulnerable populations and reinforcing the stratification.

Throughout this study by listening to Mischief Brew and analyzing the lyrical content the greatest finding of this paper has been the eye-opening perspective of how culture is moved not by the maintenance of the status-quo or by reactionary action that seeks to re-create a mythologized past but, by direct action, solidarity, and equitable communication and organization that seeks to dismantle and subvert stratification of any kind wherever it may be found.